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ABSTRACT

A study examined the re-entry female student as a composite of the various roles she plays, and also traced the changes that occurred during her first semester in college, specifically in composition class. Internal and external factors, both positive and negative; the writing process itself; and the mode and focus of instruction during that period were examined. The data was gathered from a variety of sources: written and follow-up oral interviews of the subjects regarding their writing history (both experience and instruction); pre- and post-instruction writing attitude surveys; course and instructor evaluations; video-taped writing sessions and subsequent protocol sessions; portfolio protocol sessions at the close of the semester; and pre- and post-instruction surveys focusing on internal and external factors influencing the re-entry experience. Subjects were 12 students in the first semester of their re-entry experience at a public midwestern university, and the most salient factors which characterized that teaching-learning situation were highlighted. Findings suggest that: re-entry students need the opportunity to develop writing abilities to their greatest individual potentials, recognizing in the process of development the profound relationship between writing and thinking, and thereby achieving the ability not only to better understand their world, but to act with greater confidence upon it. Fear of failure was very strong among this group of women. Instructors who are willing to accept the combined roles of resource person, facilitator, procedural technician, co-inquirer, and collaborator, can provide needed support. (RAE)

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FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE RE-ENTRY WOMEN IN COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSES

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FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE RE-ENTRY WOMEN IN COLLEGE WRITING CLASSES

Over half of the adult students enrolled at colleges and universities in the United States are women twenty five and older. Among this population, an identifiable group exists who discontinued their education to become homemakers and who are returning after child-rearing to pursue vocational skills or to complete a degree program. These students have been designated "re-entry women." The purpose of this presentation is to encourage evaluation of the extent to which we in higher education--specifically, English education--are meeting the needs of re-entry students.

To date, no research is available which examines specifically these women as writers in first semester composition classes. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to examine the re-entry student as a composite of the various roles she plays, and to trace changes that occurred during her first semester in college, specifically in the composition class. Accordingly, it examined internal and external factors, both positive and negative; the writing process itself; and the mode and focus of instruction during that period.

The data which permitted a delineation of the re-entry woman writer as she grew and changed was gathered from a variety of sources: written and follow-up oral interviews of the subjects regarding their writing history (both experience and instruction); pre- and post-instruction writing attitude surveys; course and instructor evaluations; video-taped writing sessions and subsequent protocol sessions; portfolio protocol sessions at the close of the semester; and pre- and post-instruction surveys focusing on internal and external factors influencing the re-entry experience.

This presentation will highlight the most salient factors which characterized the teaching-learning situation in which the twelve students of the study spent the first semester of their re-entry experience. It will conclude with observations about the extent to which various instructional strategies meet the needs of re-entry students in their respective college composition classes.

FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE RE-ENTRY WOMEN IN COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSES

One of the most significant changes in higher education in the last decade has been the doubling of enrollment by students older than twenty-five. Of this non-traditional enrollment, a majority are women who interrupted their formal learning to marry and raise a family (Troyka, 1982; Hodgkinson, 1983). These students, who form a significant and identifiable group, have been designated "re-entry women" (Wheaton & Robinson, 1982).

The extent to which we in higher education have failed to recognize and, therefore, address the particular needs of re-entry women students is a matter of concern. In most cases we have simply made traditional academic programs more accessible to these students, taking into consideration few, if any, of the complex internal and external factors which directly affect their ability to succeed.

The research reported here evolved from concern not only about increased numbers of re-entry women students in first semester writing classes, but also about their performance as writers. The scope of the study was sufficiently broad to examine both the internal factors--including self-concept--and the external factors--positive and negative--which affect re-entry women as writers. Of particular interest to this study was the extent to which composition classroom environment, focus, or mode of instruction might impinge on the re-entry process as well as on the writing processes of these students. Accordingly, data were gathered from a variety of sources, including surveys of both the students and instructors involved. Student data

included a pre-instruction questionnaire exploring attitudes and external factors affecting re-entry; a pre-instruction writing attitude survey; a writing history; an interview at the conclusion of the first three weeks of instruction; a video-taped writing session and retrospective protocol at mid-semester; a post-instruction survey focusing on perceived changes of the students as writers; a post-instruction writing attitude survey; a post-instruction evaluation of factors; and a portfolio protocol.

Adult students have been described in adult education literature as active, self-directed learners who seek to alter their established identities, are sensitive to their capabilities, enjoy considerable experience, have a developed self-confidence, have varied strategies for learning, and who divide their time between academics and other responsibilities (Kasworm, 1980). This study found re-entry women to be somewhat different.

While the sample for this particular study included but twelve women at two campuses of a public, midwestern university, there is no reason to suspect that these women were unique in any way. Instead, they seemed to be quite representative of larger populations of re-entry women students at universities across the country. In contrast to the aforementioned characteristics of adult learners, these women, upon re-entry, did not enjoy a well-defined sense of direction or an established identity. They did not value their experience. They had conflicting self-expectations and a low tolerance for uncertainty. They lacked confidence in their ability to learn--and lacked the time to manage academics and other responsibilities to their satisfaction.

Data gathered made the following conclusions regarding the re-entry process and writing instruction of re-entry students possible:

First, the most powerful internal factor which has direct bearing on the re-entry students' initial experience is fear: fear of failure. A cognate is, of course, low self-esteem. These two factors combine to shape the unfounded self-perception that the re-entry woman will simply not be able to learn, hence, will not be able to compete successfully in the classroom. She enters college, therefore, a highly apprehensive learner, committed to a dream with little if any appreciation of her ability to attain it. To compund the problem is the third most influential factor: a sense of guilt. Re-entry women are concerned about the sacrifices they believe their spouse, or boyfriend, and children will make to allow pursuit of the dream, inflating the cost of its attainment.

External factors exacerbate the stress. Chief among these is time. There simply is not enough time to accommodate all of the roles re-entry women must play. The second factor is the combined quantity and quality of support from family members and friends. Even though the women prepare meticulously for their re-entry by re-assigning certain limited household chores to other family members, aligning surrogate care, securing financial aid, and orienting both nuclear and extended family members to the perceived changes in routine, they cannot guarantee success of their plans in the long term. Thus, from day one of re-entry, they are concerned about the collapse of their support.

Still, they remain optimistic, confident that others will understand, endorse, and provide substantive assistance. This optimism is critical to the re-entry process. Without the sustaining belief in continued support, in their own ability to manage time, and to juggle roles successfully, these women simply would not re-enter school. Or, if they would re-enter, they wouldn't stay. Herein a paradox is revealed: women who manifest profound fear of the experience they are entering must first have a strong sense of their ability to succeed at it--or they logically wouldn't take the risk.

The findings in this study revealed that, in most cases, only personal resolve intensified by discoveries about their ability to learn, and a rapidly increasing sense of self worth made it possible for the women to complete the semester. Another factor, the discovery of a new support group--that of concerned faculty and other re-entry women--contributed significantly as well. These factors support the literature that recommends positive opportunities early in the re-entry experience.

Other factors that merit discussion include the effect of the re-entry experience on family relations. Women return to school only after having carefully weighed the impact of their decision on those closest to them. While convincing generalizations may not be drawn from this small sampling, several observations can be made. There is no question, for instance, that the re-entry experience increases stress in all of these relationships. There is no doubt, either, that the burden of equanimity remains with the re-entry student.

The remainder of this presentation will focus on the re-entry student as writer.

Before re-entry, internal factors had intruded foremost in the process by which the students appraised their ability not only to control their language, but to control the thought processes that give rise to written expression. They had been convinced that even if they had thoughts which merited written expression, they were poorly equipped to record them. A lack of confidence intervened between their desire to create and share thoughts and the act of composing text. Accordingly, the majority of women had restricted their writing to personal notes and functional missives. Few among them had done much school-sponsored writing, either. As a result, they were utterly unprepared to write their way to a solution.

At the outset of this research I had anticipated final discussions with the writers that would reveal the extent to which they had changed as a result of their first semester writing experience. My intention to describe the participants' growth as writers was hindered, however, by two factors. First, and most important to the project, was the interference of internal factors. Although the women perceived as well as demonstrated positive alteration of their self-images in general as a result of the semester's experience, they did <u>not</u> perceive change in their abilities as writers. None could speak definitively to the question of growth. Few could respond at all. What stood in the way appeared to be the assignment of the term "writer" to their role in the composition classroom. A translation of their hesitancy might render: "My work doesn't measure up; it doesn't fit the role." "I am not a writer; I am a re-entry student who does writing." The implication was

clear: writing was viewed by these women as too powerful a skill for them to attain in the short term. For most, satisfaction was measured by a reduction of surface errors; for some, by a sense that writing--once it had been identified as a process through instruction--was easier.

Several students observed that their greatest growth had come through, not in, writing: that growth was in thinking. One student speaks quite well for the others in her remarks: "I think I have grown mainly because having not gone to school for so long it is almost as if my mind had stopped. You can go to work every day and you can deal with your family, your children every day, but that's different. There's something--a third type of thing you can do--and that's real thinking. I was amazed at some of the things I was able to come up with or think, because I hadn't thought like that before I went to school. But now that I've been forced into thinking I can see that the possibilities are unlimited." This student had written ten compositions during the semester, each encouraging experimentation with different rhetorical strategies, aims, and audiences.

Here the relationship between challenging topics and intellectual develpment was evident. That the students who had had the option to write essentially personal narratives did not mention growth at all, either in writing skill or thinking ability, is noteworthy. The sense that some of the women had become "real" thinkers can, perhaps, be marked as their greatest achievement. The fact that the demands of writng contributed directly to intellectual stimulation ought to be noted by teachers of composition.

Analysis of combined data revealed the lack of commonality of the semester's writing experience. While the women shared common internal factors, they brought to the experience personal histories sufficiently distinctive to produce unique experiences in their first semester of composition. The common factors of little initial confidence and strong goal orientation, however, led to the indefatigable pursuit of their instructors' composition goals. In some cases they prewrote, wrote, and re-wrote, incorporating emphases that they had not acknowledged before instruction. Their behaviors were altered. Some spent an inordinate amount of time prewriting while others spent an equal amount of time quantifying surface features and searching for errors; both at the behest of their instructors. Some sought the assistance of computers in the production of text, while still others thumbed through dictionaries looking for words that met the prescribed standard of academic discourse. Some expressed the frustration that no matter what they did, it was not good enough to meet their instructor's expectations. Others expressed delight that their thoughts had found an appreciative audience--for some, the instructor, for others, peers with whom they regularly shared text. The inference can be drawn: mode and focus of instruction were among the factors that influenced these writers.

What has been learned from this limited study can inform the instruction of re-entry women. It is important, first of all, that educators appreciate the complex network of factors affecting the women in their new role as students. Sensitivity to their unique situation should result in a mode and focus of instruction that would create experiences that enable the women to attain not only their long-range

goals but their more immediate ones, including increased self-esteem.

It has been clearly established that fear characterized the initial attitude of re-entry women. In recognition of this fact, instructors should immediately create an atmosphere of trust. This includes, of course, not only the ambience of the classroom. but also accessability, and the nature of criticism of the students' work.

Time is critical to these students. Instructors ought to respect the extent to which the time these women have is fragmented by their various roles and plan productive, student-centered activities during class which would enable the women to be more efficient in fulfilling their out-of-class writing obligations. Various strategies for probing, for entering the writing process, for composing, for revising, and for editing should be shared. Yet care must be taken not to make such instruction so prescriptive as to become oppressive or encumbering.

Thirdly, one of the recognized strengths of re-entry women is the wealth of experience they bring to the writing situation. One of the recognized weaknesses is that they do not value this experience sufficiently to feel comfortable tapping it. A recommendation for instruction would be to afford them the opportunity early in the term to examine their experiences--and dignify them by written expression. Clearly, however, after a period of time for acclimation, re-entry students are ready for the challenge of "real" thinking. Instructors must recognize this fact in giving writing assignments.

Evaluation is another factor that influences re-entry women writers. Heightened sensitivities make these students particularly vulnerable to criticism, which they accept all too willingly and on which they base immediate and at times profound behavior change. The explanation of such behavior must lie in internal factors not entirely elucidated by this research, but sufficiently evident to suggest that instructors ought to be concerned that their advice is, first of all, well-founded; and secondly, that it is understood in the context of the process it is intended to inform.

Given the time, the strategies, and the encouragement, re-entry students will experiment and select processes that work best for them. It must be remembered that they are well experienced in both experimentation and selection, and should be afforded the opportunity to do both in the production of writing. They must be offered a variety of experiences in a supportive environment.

In conclusion, re-entry students need the opportunity to develop writing abilities to their greatest individual potentials, recognizing in the process of development the profound relationship between writing and thinking, and thereby achieving the ability not only to better understand their world, but to act with greater confidence upon it. Instructors who are willing to accept the combined roles of resource person, facilitator, procedural technician, co-inquirer, and collaborator, provide that opportunity.

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